

Using the internet to teach politics: an analysis of student engagement

Abstract

Within pedagogic research on the teaching of politics, comparatively little attention has been paid to internet-based tools (Hamann et al. 2016). This article focuses on student use of custom-designed, supplementary websites for university-level politics units in the UK, featuring links to material in non-traditional formats (e.g. YouTube videos, podcasts, news articles). Achieving approximately 5,000 pageviews in three years – dropping off almost entirely once no longer employed for teaching – this article argues that these are an interesting way of exploring student use of web-based teaching tools. The article begins with the rationale and design of the websites before presenting some of the viewing statistics provided by Blogger, which form the basis of this article. I explore these statistics arguing that politics students: are engaged learners; value non-subject specific information e.g. study skills and mental health resources; and seem especially interested in gender and democracy.

Introduction

Writing in *PS: Political Science & Politics* in 1995, William J. Ball titles an article *Using the Internet as a Teaching Tool: Why Wait Any Longer?* (Ball 1995). Since then – extending Ball's suggestion of discussion groups and mailing lists – many political science educators have unwittingly responded "why indeed?", making use of a variety of tools such as Twitter (Blair 2013), Tumblr (Kohen 2014) and WordPress (Caughell 2018). Despite this, as Hamann et al. (2016) have argued, comparatively little attention has been paid to researching the methods and effectiveness of the internet as a teaching tool within this discipline. In this article I seek to contribute to this endeavour. In order to do so, I make use of the viewing figures for two websites I designed for two politics courses on which I taught, exploring the ways in which students engaged with these and what this might mean.

I am an associate teacher (that is, not the module leader/lecturer but rather a seminar tutor) at an institution based in the United Kingdom which is in the top thirty largest universities by both enrolment and subject rank. Over the period examined (2015-17) I undertook seminar teaching for large-scale first year undergraduate units in political science. The number of students enrolled on a unit at any one time was approximately 150 people and, of these, between 22 and 33 were taught directly by me. For both units I made a digital resource intended to act as a repository. This article draws upon Blogger's range of tools that allow you to see how many people have visited each page on your website and in what country they are based (among others).

In this article I begin by setting out the objectives I had in mind when creating these websites before explaining how I did this. I then provide the pageviews from the two websites, along with some other interesting information about usage, all drawn from Blogger's "stats" facility. The final section draws upon the usage figures and explores what they might tell us both about how politics students engage with internet-based teaching tools and what it could mean more widely. Overall, students used these resources in ways that surprised me. With almost five thousand pageviews, students made much more use of these websites than I had anticipated. With respect to the topics that received the most pageviews, students seem to be surprisingly interested in study skills, and have a clear appetite for easily digestible information on mental health. In addition, a large number of people were drawn to gender, which mirrors my classroom experience that students are hungry for more information on this topic and that interest in this subject is growing faster than many others.

Objectives and rationale in designing the websites

In considering how to enhance my students' learning on the two modules I first taught there were a range of options open to me, from simulations to creative methods like poster making. However, 'web-based learning is flexible and can be used in a variety of ways, either as an integral part of the whole module or simply as an add-on' (Lee 2003, 66-7) and, due to this flexibility, I opted for an

internet-based tool. While Ball (1995) dedicates a large proportion of space to concerns about student access to the internet, in 2019 in the UK almost every student at least has a smartphone and will otherwise be able to access this material on a campus computer. As Graham, McNeil and Pettiford (2017) have argued, digital teaching methods must consider what students need, how students might actually engage with the teaching tools used, and what digital tools allow us to do that could not be done using another method. To this end, I opted to provide additional materials in a wider range of formats (e.g. podcasts) that students were likely to be familiar with already, and to put these on a website that would be easy to bookmark and access. For example, on the justice page of my political concepts website – among other things – I posted a podcast with Martha Nussbaum, YouTube videos of Michael Sandel and a news article about the number of doctors earning over £100,000.

When designing these web-based tools, I did so in order to ‘enrich the learning experience’ for my students (Lee 2003, 67), to push them to engage with these subjects in a wider variety of ways that might improve their enjoyment and learning within the subject. Others have found that engagement with tools like this aids learning in the field of politics and international relations. Ralph, Head and Lightfoot (2010) found that podcast consumption improves engagement and enjoyment for example. In order to measure this they asked students what they thought of the incorporation of podcast material into the learning offer, offering this as an illustrative quote: ‘Actually, I like getting a broad range of resources. It makes it more interesting if you’ve got a range of stuff’ (Ralph, Head and Lightfoot 2010, 21). Student enjoyment may also make it easier to learn. These are first year units, where students are still to some extent “learning how to learn” and thus, these websites offered additional support in this respect, exposing them to ideas beyond the required reading, in an easy to digest format. This principle of learning support is often referred to scaffolding, ‘a term which helps to portray the temporary, but essential nature of the mentor’s assistance as the learner advances in knowledge and understanding’ (Maybin et al. 1992, 21).

Website design

I put these free websites together in Blogger, using a pre-existing template that appeared attractive but, crucially, easy to navigate. I added the following academic disclaimer, reminding students that TED Talks and podcasts were not to be substituted for the required reading, but instead were intended to act as supplementary material:

‘This website has been created by Natalie Jester at the University of Bristol. It is intended to act as a repository for useful links for the Approaches to the Study of Political Science course. To clarify, this is absolutely NOT intended to replace your academic reading, but to supplement it with different methods of learning such as videos, podcasts, news articles, and other websites. Material on this site is meant to get you thinking; as usual, be careful about citing news articles in essays, they should be used for points of fact only. Academic material should always make up the vast majority of references.’

It took approximately 15 minutes to set each one up initially, copying across material I had already, with perhaps ten minutes of maintenance per week as I added new material that I had found. As mentioned above, at first these were simply intended as repositories for a wider range of academic material, but it became clear to me over the course of my teaching that – for one reason or another – students also wanted information relating to other areas and I decided to provide that, too. As a result, I added pages on writing and study skills, mental health and information relevant to international students. As an assistant teacher (seminar tutor) it was important for me to acknowledge that I was part of a wider teaching team and, thus, I made these digital resources after discussion with the relevant unit owners (lecturers in charge of running the units).

Whilst I created these for my own students – I was, perhaps, one of five seminar tutors for each unit – I shared these resources with the unit owners and other seminar tutors, and students across the cohort told their seminar tutors that they were using it. I stopped using one website because the unit

owner decided to make his own (a decision I was OK with. I contributed towards the new iteration, which was less a repository for materials and more a site for unpicking some interesting readings on a given subject) and the other because the unit was retired.

Illustrative Blogger statistics

Below can be found two tables – one for each unit taught – with the number of pageviews per page, with each page dedicated to one topic/week of teaching.

Table 1: pages and pageviews Political Concepts (term 1)	
Page name	Number of views
Gender	141
Democracy	115
Equality	82
Justice	69
Power	59
Disobedience/political obligation	59
Multiculturalism	51
Liberty	48
Nationalism	40
Total views, all-time (only used in teaching in 2015): 1,107	

Table 2: pages and pageviews Approaches to the Study of Political Science (term 2)		
Page name	Number of views all time	Number of unit-specific pageviews divided by three for comparison with Table 1
Writing and study skills	526	-
Behaviouralism	295	98
Plural and elite accounts	225	75
Rational choice	202	67
General politics	182	-
Mental health	177	-
Constructivism	166	55
Institutionalism	156	52
Marxism	141	47
Path dependency	94	31
Ideational accounts	69	23
International students	36	-
Total views, all-time (only used in teaching over three years, 2015-2017): 3,870		

It is important to note that the website for political concepts was employed only in one year of teaching, whilst the website for the other unit was utilised over three years. If we divide the pageviews by three, then, we can compare the number of views relative to the first website which was used only once. After examining the figures in this way, it appears that there is little difference between student use of these websites across different units. Views per page was not the only available data for these websites, however. These were open websites with no password protection and therefore were available to anyone, in any country across the world. Despite this, whilst it is impossible to be sure, it seems likely that most of these pageviews were from students taking these units at my institution because the number of pageviews decreased to almost zero after I stopped using these websites in

my classes. In addition, the keywords employed in the design of these websites were extremely broad and thus it would be difficult to find these websites if you performed an internet search for, say, “behaviouralism examples” as so many other sites would come up first. Blogger’s statistics suggest that 79% and 82% of pageviews respectively were from the UK, making this even more likely. Interestingly, on the *Approaches* website, the referring URL for 84 pageviews was Facebook. Whilst this number is not high proportion of the total, it demonstrates that the website was shared on social media which had not been anticipated, though perhaps it should have been.

Analysis

As explained above, Graham, McNeill and Pettiford (2017) have argued that we should design digital tools with student engagement in mind: what will students actually *use*? Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of the viewing figures laid out above is how much students actually used these websites. When I created these websites I attempted to make something that students would engage with, using formats familiar in their day to day lives. Despite this, I had not expected this level of engagement and, whilst I did not have firm engagement targets in mind, students used these websites far more than I thought they might. The stereotype of the “lazy” university student is one that refuses to die, as Times Higher Education summarises one of their articles on Twitter, ‘The lamest generation: I can’t teach millennials – they refuse to take any responsibility for their learning, says an assistant professor’ (Times Higher Education 2018). Yet, much like my experience in the classroom, the numbers making use of these websites suggests that students are *not* disengaged. I suggest instead that some of the other issues discussed below may provide some clues as to why students might *present as* disengaged on some occasions.

The most popular page on either website was the writing and study skills page. This page was designed to provide students with simple practical tips for their work, including instructions for finding appropriate essay material, an essay plan map, an introduction to topic and thesis sentences, a grammar exercise and an interactive guide to referencing. I also integrated this page into my

classroom teaching, reminding students who asked about a particular issue that there was a relevant resource on the website that would be of use to them. . In class, students often expressed confusion about how to *do* an essay: it is all well and good to tell a student to improve their argument but what does that mean in concrete terms. As alluded to above, then, where some people might perceive students to be disengaged, what they are perhaps seeing is a student body needing additional support in how to “do” university. Indeed, it would not be surprising that students struggling with this might not seem engaged or enthusiastic. The attention paid by students to this page suggests that more could be done to provide easy to access resources that speak to concrete elements of student skills development. For instance, providing easy-to-understand information about topic sentences is a simple way to help students improve their writing, providing a clear path from the statement ‘you should work on your writing’ to an actionable means of making this happen.

The page for mental health was added following direct discussions and a wider sense from discussions both inside and outside the classroom that students were struggling, as noted in the website design section. This page (which I made the very first tab after the homepage) began with a plea for students to tell us if they were not feeling right. After this, I included links to: crisis support, university services, local services, specific services for marginalised groups, peer-to-peer, and digital support. The page was added after I put up all the pages relating to the weekly topics of the course and students thus has less time to access and read it. It is, therefore, interesting that despite this, it was the sixth most read page out of the 12 on that website. According a study by Pereira et al. (2019), examining 37,500 students across 140 UK universities, one-fifth of students now have a diagnosed condition the number of students with mental health problems is increasing. Over my time teaching it has been my experience that students have difficulties accessing information about the systems created to help them: it is one of life’s great cruelties that mental health problems themselves function as a barrier towards obtaining the support necessary for mental health recovery. As an academic staff member, it is not my role to provide counselling for students because that is a task for which I am simply not qualified. Instead, seminar tutors have an important role to play in signposting available services and

resources to their students; I have done this in class and in tutorials but it appears that doing so digitally *in a simple format* is also valued (provided the information is kept up to date). Difficulties with mental health – and accessing support – may provide further insight into why students might appear disengaged.

The topics students were drawn to most across these two websites are also interesting. Firstly with respect to gender, there were 141 pageviews for this topic in the year I employed this website in teaching, which is high given that there were only approximately 150 people on that course. The interest in gender on my website is reflected in my experience of teaching in class, where students have become more and more interested in the subject over the years, and reflects a wider trend within the academy to take seriously the inclusion of a wider range of voices in higher education teaching (Jester 2018). Secondly, it is also interesting that in 2015 students were keen to learn about the principles underpinning the concept of democracy. This class was taught a couple of months after a general election – with the new government looking to make its mark – and was the year in which discussion of a referendum on UK membership of the European Union first took off significantly. It is, therefore, possible that students were responding to these debates. Both the topics of gender and democracy fell in the second half of this course and would, therefore, be employed only in the second assessment. This stands in contrast with the pageviews for the Approaches to the Study of Political Science website, which almost exactly follow the order in which topics come in the syllabus. Earlier topics attracted more attention, perhaps because the earlier assessment focused on the first few weeks and the subjects could then be revised again for the end of term exam, which incorporated every topic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that these figures demonstrate that politics students are in fact quite engaged with their learning. This was borne out in the number of pageviews, as well as the students who brought these examples into class conversations, exam answers, and positive module feedback at the

end of term. The engagement in particular with two non-subject specific pages (writing and study skills and mental health resources) suggests that students appreciate additional support in “learning how to learn” and maintain a good level of mental wellbeing, which makes study both easier and more enjoyable. Beyond this, politics student engagement with the pages relating to gender and democracy is interesting, perhaps reflective of wider, growing appreciation of the subject as a discipline and a desire to keep abreast of the concepts underpinning the key debates of the day. Overall, I argue that internet-based tools can be simple and fast to set up, and make a valuable contribution to the teaching of politics at university.

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